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Courthouses deserve honor, not demolition

by Randall T. Shepard

The recent vote of the Randolph County Commission to demolish the 1875 courthouse in Winchester has led me to reflect on why I treasure Indiana's historic courthouses.

In most Hoosier county seats, the three tallest structures historically were the grain elevator, the church and the courthouse. Despite our skyscraping capability, this remains true in a remarkable number of our 92 counties.



The grain elevator visibly declares the dominance of agriculture, an industrial engine that remains an important aspect of the state's economy. The soaring church steeple, erected at great expense by contributions from the congregation, documents our forebears' belief in God and gratitude for the blessings of their American lives. The towering courthouse symbolizes their hopes for the creation of a just society.

The British call such structures "government houses." Ignoring inherited terminology, Americans labeled these buildings courthouses, suggesting that the dispensing of justice was a higher aspiration. The term reflects what the founders of our country hoped for when they wrote the Declaration of Independence.

Considering the years in which most of Indiana's current courthouses were built—the 1870s through the 1890s—the sheer size and elegance tells you a great deal about the importance people gave to constructing the place where justice is dispensed. The expenditure of hundreds of thousands in 1880 reflected the serious level of commitment to what our nineteenth-century counterparts considered the most elevating of our civic activities. The tax dollars they raised—and sacrificed at the expense of other government services—to pay for our courthouses shows the value they placed on this symbol of community life. Their investment shames by comparison the cheap, unadorned and even tawdry government structures we frequently build today.

Indiana has seen the demise of only eight courthouses since 1937 and a comparison of the originals and the replacements would cause most observers to lament the man-made losses in Anderson, Indianapolis, Muncie, New Albany, Jeffersonville, and Logansport, and English. A 1974 tornado destroyed White County's 1890s courthouse in Monticello.

As a member of Indiana's Supreme Court, I have been privileged to "testify" at the rededications of many restored courthouses, from small-town examples in still largely rural counties to urban blockbusters. The magnificent Allen County courthouse in Fort Wayne, built in 1902, was rededicated 100 years later following a \$9 million restoration. Funding came from individuals, corporations, and philanthropies, with the first ten per cent contributed by attorneys and law firms. The restored Tippecanoe County Courthouse in Lafayette, constructed 1881-84, represents an earlier example of the blockbuster variety, a structure of elaborate architecture and ornamentation. Restoration is underway now at the Hancock County Courthouse in Greenfield.

Ohio County, the smallest county in the state with the oldest continuously functioning courthouse, restored its 1844 Greek Revival courthouse before gaming money arrived to enrich government coffers. The commissioners built a simple addition, compatible with the architecture of the original, to meet space needs. Many counties have built courthouse additions or annexes to address the demand for storage of advancing decades' worth of documents, space for increased functions of government, and handicapped accessibility.

A sympathetically designed addition also filled the space requirements in Greensburg, home of the locally beloved and widely recognized Decatur County Courthouse where a tree grows from the tower top. The 1873 Scott County Courthouse in Scottsburg received a 1996 addition that keeps the focus on the historic structure, respectfully taking the architectural backseat as it were.

Many counties have laudably retained their courthouses and saved other landmarks by turning them into county annexes—historic school buildings in Angola (Steuben County), Greencastle (Putnam County) and Decatur (Adams County) now house annexes. In New Castle, a Masonic lodge won new life as Henry County's government annex.

In my hometown of Evansville and a few other cases, preservationists saved the historic courthouse when the county moved out. A complex built in the 1960s houses city and county government, but the heavily ornamented 1880s Vanderburgh County Courthouse was preserved. It accommodated a variety of nonprofit, retail and office tenants for three decades, and now the county is using it again.

These Indiana examples join others throughout the nation in showing that the historic architecture of courthouses can be maintained and adapted to meet the needs and demands of the twenty-first century. Space and accessibility limitations are problems that can be overcome, not reasons to demolish such venerable structures.

Courthouse preservation is a matter of civic will and respect for the high ideals of our forebears. These beautiful structures reflect our better selves: they should be saved, restored, and honored.

The Hon. Randall T. Shepard is Chief Justice of the Indiana Supreme Court and Honorary Chairman of Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana. (Submitted as an op-ed to Indiana newspapers by Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana.)